INTERVIEW BY SHAWN O'SULLIVAN

MICHAEL MATTIS AND JUDITH HOCHBERG

■ **Michael Mattis** and his wife, Judith Hochberg, began collecting photographs in the early 1980s. Both were academics (he a nuclear physicist, she a linguist and teacher) with an interest in photography. Within two decades, the couple transformed their avocation into a vocation, with Michael becoming a full-time collector. At the center of their collection is a group of photographs by Edward Weston spanning his entire career. Mattis and Hochberg combine academic rigor with their passion for photography, researching and getting as close to the original sources as possible—in the case of Weston, most of the work was acquired directly from Weston's family members or close associates.

Their lives as collectors have been storied, not only through the love of the hunt but through a sprinkling of adventure as well as intrigue. In 2000, Mattis was working at Los Alamos National Laboratory when a devastating fire threatened all the homes in the area. He and his 15-year-old daughter packed a borrowed truck with thousands of prints and fled, finding sanctuary in Santa Fe. The family eventually moved back to Westchester County, New York, where *B&W* spoke with Mattis.

■ **B&W:** *How did you get started?*

■ **Mattis:** We went to Stanford University for graduate school. There we discovered Butterfield's auction house. For a few hundred dollars left over from our monthly grad school stipends, we could go there and buy an Ansel Adams. That seemed like a pretty smart thing to do. We started with less expensive things. We didn't yet know the value of vintage.

Judith Hochberg and Michael Mattis

■ **B&W:** *Do you only buy vintage?*

■ **Mattis:** As much as possible, and generally only prints that were made by the photographer.

■ **B&W:** *Can you tell us in broad terms what's in your collection?*

■ **Mattis:** Looking now at our collection in a historical way, it proceeds very slowly through the first two decades of photography, beginning with William Henry Fox Talbot. It's very rich in 1840s English photography and 1850s French photography. And, of course, we are infatuated with the work of Julia Margaret Cameron. Then we move into Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo Secession, then to Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and the f/64 school. It finishes with Diane Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe—after this point photography bifurcates into traditional photography versus "photo-based art." It's a good ending point for a photography collection.

■ **B&W:** *How many images do you have in the collection?*

■ **Mattis:** Thousands. I practice something called "X-treme collecting." Suppose that Judy and I want to buy 10 pictures by an artist. Rather than, like normal people, going out and buying each picture one at a time, I'll try to find a collection of, say, 50 pictures by that artist, buy the 50 and keep the 10 that we want. The other 40 find their way into the market. It takes a steel gut to do this.

■ **B&W:** *What advice do you have for collectors?*

■ **Mattis:** Photographs are pretty expensive now—consider old master paintings instead! But if you must collect photographs, auction previews are a wonderful place to get a snapshot of the entire history of photography. You can handle the material, take it out of the frame, and ask questions, such as, "How do you know this is a vintage print?" and, "Is this the best print of this image ?"

■ **B&W:** *Do you ever lend any of your collection out?*

■ **Mattis:** We have several shows right now. A historical survey titled *Picture Perfect* is at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, and there is *Edward Weston: Life Work*—one hundred prints traveling around the country for five years, with an accompanying book published by Lodima Press. We also own a rare presentation album by Julia Margaret Cameron that was the subject of two books and a traveling exhibition in the 1990s.

■ **B&W:** *How did you discover the Lewis Hine forgeries?*

■ **Mattis:** I actually started that forensic project hoping to protect my investment, since I had bought a lot of these questionable prints. I was dismayed to discover that all signs pointed to their being posthumous forgeries, made some 30 years after Hine's death. Photo conservator Paul Messier and I came up with several independent diagnostic tests that are now standard for dating 20th-century photographic papers. That was a good thing that came out of this.

■ **B&W:** *What are you into now?*

■ **Mattis:** Mike Disfarmer was a genius portrait photographer who operated a studio in Heber Springs, Arkansas, from 1915 to 1955. For the past two years I have hired and trained a team that have combed every dirt road in Heber Springs and bought Disfarmer's entire life's work of vintage prints from private family albums. A major show purchased from our collection will run Sep 8 to Oct 15 at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in New York City. This project has resembled an enormous archaeological dig, reconstituting the 40-year output of this great artist, when previously only modern prints of images from the World War Two years had been available. This has been the most interesting historical reclamation project I've ever attempted. ■